The Beginnings of Democracy

Each city-state in Greece had its own characteristics. Different cities developed different types of government. For a long time, most Greek states were ruled by groups of rich landowners. Gradually, other people began to want a say in decision making. In some places, riots broke out. To restore peace, people in some city-states agreed to let one man have complete control. These leaders were called tyrants. When tyrants fell from power, civil war often followed.

Around 508 B.C. an Athenian named Cleisthenes had an idea for stopping the cycle of tyrant, rebellion, and civil war. He suggested a whole new system of government. This new system would involve a lot more people in governing the city. The Greek word for people was demos, and the word for government was kratos. These words were eventually combined to give a name to the new system: demokratia—democracy.

This new system involved all the citizens of Athens in government. However, it's important to remember that the term "citizens of Athens" wasn't the same as "people of Athens." Citizenship was open only to free adult men whose parents were Athenian. Women, slaves, and foreigners were not eligible for citizenship. In 451 B.C. the population of Athens was about 300,000. This included about 75,000 slaves, 35,000 foreigners, 100,000 children of citizens, and 35,000 wives of citizens. Only 45,000—15 percent—of the people who lived in Athens were actually citizens and eligible to vote.

The laws of Athens were made by the Assembly, or ecclesia. This consisted of any citizens of Athens who chose to take part. The Assembly met about every 10 days at the Pnyx, a hill in Athens. At least 6,000 citizens had to be present to hold a meeting of the Assembly. If too few citizens came, special police were sent out to bring more citizens to the meeting. These meetings began early in the morning and could go on until dark. The Assembly decided on laws and public policies like taxes and building programs.

To take care of the day-to-day business of the city, a council called the bouleterion was chosen each year. The council consisted of 500 citizens, 50 from each of the 10 tribes of Athens. They were chosen by lot by having their names drawn from a container. The council drew up policies and laws to present to the Assembly.

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The Athenian democracy also included a board of 10 generals, the strategoi. These generals were elected, not chosen by lot. One was chosen from each tribe. The generals were more than military leaders. They were the ones who carried out the decisions of the council and the Assembly. They met with foreign envoys to Athens, and supervised state officials like tax collectors and ship repairers. There was no time limit on serving as general. The same person could be reelected general many times.

To make sure that no one person could become too powerful, the Athenian democratic system included one more safeguard. Once a year a special vote was held in the Assembly. Bits of broken pottery called ostrakon were used as ballots. Any citizen present at the meeting could choose the man he most wanted to have leave Athens, and write that man's name on an ostrakon. If 6,000 or more citizens named one person, that man had to leave Athens for 10 years. No charges had to be made against him, much less proven; he just had to leave. (This is the source of the English word ostracism.)

Imagine that our democratic system included ostracism. How would it affect politics?

1. Think about people who are active in politics today. This can be at any level: local, state, or national. Do you think things would improve if one of these people had to leave politics for 10 years? Choose one name to write on an ostrakon.

2. Prepare an ostrakon for the vote. The Athenians used broken pottery because there was always plenty of it available. You will use a piece of cardboard or oaktag as your ostrakon. Paint it black or terra cotta. These were the typical colors of Athenian pottery.

3. Use a paper clip or other sharp tool to scratch a name in the paint of your ostrakon.

Ostrakon naming Kimon of Athens, ostracized in 461 B.C.